

N.Y. firm's own report cites carcinogen debris

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New York Times Service

NIAGARA FALLS, N.Y. — The Hooker Chemical and Plastics Corp. plant here regularly released mercury, chlorine, phosphorous-based gases and persistent carcinogenic pesticides into the air and sewers of the city and in spills inside the plant, endangering the health of workers and the community, according to a 1975 internal company report made available yesterday.

Plant workers interviewed over the last two days have outlined a number of health complaints, including allegations of high leukemia rates among former benzene workers; other cancers among former pesticide workers, and outbreaks of red blisters so common among phenol workers that they were known as "the Hooker Bumps."

The report and the employees said the releases of chemicals were due, in part, to broken-down equipment pushed beyond its capacity, demoralized foremen and undertrained workers who did not know the dangers of the chemicals they were handling.

A Hooker spokesman, Bruce D. Davis, said later in an interview that as a result of the report the company had spent \$20 million upgrading the health and environmental safety of the plant.

Davis, executive vice president of the chemical division, also said that the company had hired outside consultants to conduct an epidemiological survey of all its employees. The company has spent \$2 million to trace where every employee has worked and what chemicals he has been exposed to, Davis added.

Davis contended that the plant now met all federal standards for gas emission into the water and air.

Michael Stratton, a spokesman for the Federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration, said in another interview

that the company met all current standards for gases in the air.

The 1975 report, called "Operation Bootstrap," was prepared by internal engineers and doctors for the Hooker Chemicals and Plastics Corp., a subsidiary of Occidental Petroleum. It was obtained by The New York Times, Buffalo's television station WKBW, and Michael Brown, an environmental writer, from a supervising engineer who was dismissed two years ago, allegedly for complaining about unsafe emissions from the plant.

According to Michael J. Bayliss, the former supervising engineer for plant efficiency who released the report, it was Hooker company policy "not to tell workers the dangers of the chemicals they worked with." He said he had told federal safety officials about the problems but had not yet given them a copy of the report.

The plant, whose buildings and smokestacks cover several square miles here, makes water-treatment chlorines, industrial solvents, halothenated organics for pesticides and fire retardants, and a wide range of other chemicals.

According to Hooker spokesmen, federal investigators and Hooker employees, large sections of the plant here have been shut down, including those used for the manufacture of pesticides and herbicides, and others have been rebuilt since the report. But neighbors and employees said mercury, chlorine and other gases continued to be released.

Employees, including high officials in the company's internal union, repeatedly demanded anonymity when speaking with reporters.

Some, however, were willing to show their Hooker Bumps — red lumps on their faces, necks, arm-pits and elsewhere. They said 20 to 50 men had developed such bumps when they worked in the section of the plant producing 2,4,5-trichlorophenol, a defoliant.

"This ain't no chocolate factory," a former employee said.

Operation Bootstrap was written in 1974 and 1975 when the plant found itself operating at full capacity without turning a profit, and facing a host of federal environmental regulations. The report was an effort to assess the problems and the cost of fixing them, Bayliss said.

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